

Archive Print View

THIS STORY HAS BEEN FORMATTED FOR EASY PRINTING

The article you requested is displayed below.

Living archive of Christmases past, present

Date: December 15, 2012 **Section:** Features

BY WARREN PEPPER For the last 34 years, Ernestine Fellers has been an archivist in records management for the city of Charleston. Three days a week, the 89-year-old historian leaves her James Island apartment and drives to work. The last time I talked to her, she'd just changed the oil in her lawn mower on her day off.

Growing up with a brother and sister, her parents were Wadmalaw farmers. You can't help but love any conversation with her because it's peppered with a Charleston brogue that speaks of eating suppah', or reading the newspapa' and living in the Palmetto stay-it'.

When talking to Ms. Fellers, be prepared to invest some time because there are no short answers. Her mind is sharp and her memory full of details on how things are and how things used to be. Her best recollections of Christmas? Glad you asked, 'cause in her mind, "... when you bury an old person, you bury a library."

Santa always found us

Fellers' earliest memories of Christmas surface as a 6- or 7-year-old. Santa would visit Wadmalaw two days before Christmas, because on Christmas Eve, the family would load into her daddy's car for the yearly trip to Grandma's house in Hendersonville, N.C.

Also making the trip, a butchered hog tied to the running board. They'd leave at 4 a.m. and not arrive 'til midnight. What she remembers most as that old Ford rumbled through Summerville, Orangeburg and Traveler's Rest on old Highway 78 were Christmas lights. Lights from houses with electricity. Even as her eyes drooped from exhaustion, knowing Grandma's house also would have lights made it so exciting.

Upon arriving in Hendersonville, no matter the time, at breakfast the next morning her Daddy and her Grandmotha' would somehow already have sausage and hogshead cheese and liver pudding spread out on the table.

This was a tough time in our country. "We were poor, but didn't know it." One year, her brother got a yo-yo. Ernestine got a doll baby that eventually, both her daughter and granddaughter would enjoy. "It was amazing, 'cause Santa would always find us."

They'd pile into the car and make the trip back to the Lowcountry. She remembers crawling under the porch to play with her brother and his new tiny cars and trucks. They'd pour water into the rich, Wadmalaw soil to make paths for the little vehicles. In her mind, those roads all led to Charleston, where electric lights sparkled, filling this little girl's mind with all sorts of fancy.

Grand ladies, traditions

A number of women in Ernestine's family lived into their 100s. That's her game plan, as well. Every time she threatens to leave her job, Mayor Joe Riley says "... please don't leave me."

She told the mayor once, "I don't plan to be here as long as you do."

They've both been on the job about the same amount of time, and maybe her job security lies in the fact that she knows so much ... and remembers it!

She'll spend Christmas week with her daughter and granddaughter in Summerville. They'll continue the tradition of making a fruitcake and Ernestine's special ambrosia for Christmas Day. Her teen great-grandsons still want to see the ambrosia coming into the house. It seems to be almost as exciting for them as it was for Ernestine to see the lights at her grandmother's house all those years ago.

Traditions are important. They only stay alive, though, if we allow them. It takes extra effort to cut up the fruit and nuts. But those ingredients might make as big an impression as Grandma's house all lit-up with lights and love on Christmas morning. Either way, if your attitude allows time for the proper perspective this time of year, it'll make a difference when it's time for suppah'.

Reach Warren Peper at wpeper@postandcourier.com.

Technical problems: If you have a technical problem with your account please e-mail newslibrary@newsbank.com.

Copyright, 2012, The Post and Courier. All Rights Reserved.